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ByRahul Rao

Rahul Rao was enthusiastic about the opportunities and encounters catalysed by the Mumbai WSF. But the Forum's commitment to inclusion and diversity coexists with exclusions – both intentional and unintentional – that can no longer be ignored

It might seem odd to write about exclusion at the World Social Forum, given that it is widely seen – thanks to the vast numbers of movements, organisations and individuals that it attracts – as one of the most inclusive global public spheres of our time. Nevertheless, as many have emphasised, the WSF is an open but not a neutral space. Its Charter defines it as 'an open meeting place for ... groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism'.^[1] This renders it a space welcoming of only certain viewpoints – those that tend to be characterised as being of the 'left', the 'global justice movement' or (somewhat ironically) the 'anti-globalisation movement'. But there is another set of exclusions at the WSF that demand attention – those involving the marginalisation of actors physically present at the Forum, but excluded from meaningful participation in its activities. The (largely formal) exclusions of the first kind bring clarity to the murky edges of the space that is the Forum, helping to define what it is by reference to what it is not, clarifying its *non-neutrality*; but the (presumably unintended) exclusions of the second kind seriously undermine the WSF's claim to being an *open* space.

Among the formal, definitional exclusions of the WSF Charter are exclusions of substance (anyone who does not self-identify as a fellow-traveller in the struggle against neo-liberalism and imperialism) and exclusions of form ('party representations' and 'military organisations', whatever they might believe in). Exclusions of form reflect a discomfort with old, hierarchical ways of doing politics – something that has never quite been resolved and manifests itself in a number of ambiguities. The exclusion of political parties at successive WSFs, for example, has always been less than complete. The 2001 WSF received support and funding worth US\$1.3 million from the municipal government of Porto Alegre and the state government of Rio Grande do Sul, both of which were controlled by the PT (now Brazil's ruling party). The 2003 WSF was 'hijacked', in Naomi Klein's words, by high-profile appearances by heads of state Lula and Chavez.^[2] And one has only to flip through the January 2004 issues of the weekly newspaper of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), to get a sense of that organisation's participation at the Mumbai WSF.^[3]

Part of the antagonism between the 'old' left comprising political parties and trade unions and the 'new' left of anarchist groups, 'new' social movements and decentralised networks, stems from profound differences in methods of political organisation. Specifically, the 'new' left expresses a disillusionment with the vanguardist, hierarchical politics of the 'old' left, which is seen not only to have failed in its objectives but also to disrespect individual autonomy.

But the debate is not limited to working methods – at the Mumbai WSF, major disagreements over working with mainstream political actors were evident at the substantive level as well. Participants were deeply divided over the merits of allying with the official global South opposition to neo-liberalism (led, increasingly, by the governments of India, South Africa and Brazil). While some emphasised the benefits of contingent, tactical alliances with these governments (citing the 'achievements' of Cancun as an example of successful state-civil society collaboration), others expressed frustration at the neo-liberal accommodations that even relatively progressive political forces such as the PT and ANC were prone (forced?) to make upon coming to power. The complex, often uneasy, relationship between social movements and political parties (and social movements that become political parties) poses dilemmas within the nation-state as well. India's National Alliance of

People's Movements (which counts among its constituents the internationally renowned Narmada Bachao Andolan) is considering fielding candidates in the imminent parliamentary elections.[4] Ironically, civil society activism in India – which in the '80s and '90s emphasised a disillusioned separation from mainstream politics – is now driven by the very unresponsiveness of the state to infiltrate structures of power.

Talk of 'power' made some people at the WSF very uncomfortable indeed. One panelist's reference to creating a 'non-power opposition to power' struck me as decidedly odd. Non-violent resistance is an effective tactic precisely because its legitimacy gives one power – power of a different kind from that which one opposes perhaps, but power nonetheless. These different attitudes towards power appeared to be driving participants' varying approaches to questions of tactics and strategy as well as end-goals. For some, power was a bad thing in itself, to be abjured at all costs; for others, there was nothing wrong with power *per se* – much depended on how it was exercised and made accountable. These differing initial premises seemed to colour participants' views on working within or outside conventional structures of power.

The exclusion of 'military organisations' was yet another point of ambiguity at the WSF and one of several factors instigating a counter-forum – Mumbai Resistance. Although the WSF Charter's insistence on non-violent resistance is defensible on the grounds of prudence and of principle (a debate I cannot do justice to here), the exclusion of groups endorsing violent resistance in certain situations had some curious consequences. While excluding armed groups, the Charter provides for the participation of 'government leaders and members of legislatures' who accept its commitments. For some, this is tantamount to inviting (perhaps unwitting) agents of the structural violence of the state. The dilemma as Peter Waterman frames it, is whether 'the conditionalities of the Charter have been exercised more against the ultra-left than the parliamentary left and centre ([which are] often complicit with neo-liberalism)'.[5] This created a peculiar situation whereby on the one hand, actors who may have differed only marginally on ends (and even so, were broadly moving in the same political direction) but substantially on means (i.e. the use of violence) went to different forums (WSF or Mumbai Resistance); on the other hand, actors who could not be said to have shared ends (and therefore amongst whom a discussion on means – means to what? – was futile) happily congregated at the WSF, with only the most superficial shared commitments.

This also raises the persistent question of what the WSF is for. If the Forum is intended as a space for an 'internal' discussion on questions of strategy amongst those already committed to the struggle against neo-liberalism and imperialism, then it ought to be open to all those who share these ends, notwithstanding radical differences over means. It ought to welcome both the 'old' and 'new' left, the violent and non-violent, and facilitate genuine communication between these potential, but fractious, allies. If, on the other hand, the Forum is intended as a space in which to reach out to and persuade those not already committed, then the strong language opposing neo-liberalism and imperialism is surely off-putting to those who are concerned about these issues, but do not yet have fully crystallised views on them. As it currently stands, in theory the WSF is rigid about ends and means (making it a narrower space than seems apparent at first); in practice, it seems to be strict on means, while permitting greater latitude on ends (hence the presence of both 'reformists' and 'radicals', so long as their commitment to non-violence is sincere). All these possibilities for the future scope of the Forum may be defensible, but there needs to be a more explicit discussion of what would be gained and lost by adopting one or the other position.

The WSF's claim to being an open space was further undermined by a second set of exclusions. Although presumably unintended, these were no less serious in that they precluded meaningful participation of large numbers of people physically present at the Forum. Too numerous to describe exhaustively, I will discuss only three that I took to be among the most salient exclusions. The first of

these was class-based. The Profile of Participants at the 2003 WSF indicates that 73.4 percent of those who attended had received some university-level education.[6] Although corresponding statistics for the 2004 WSF are unavailable, it seems reasonable to conclude from the vast numbers of dalits ('untouchables') and adivasis (tribal peoples) present, that the social base of the WSF had expanded considerably. This did not necessarily translate into broader participation. As George Monbiot remarked, dalits and adivasis predominated in the dusty streets outside the conferences, seminars and workshops, making their presence felt through much dancing, drumming and demonstrating. Important and empowering as these activities might have been, these groups were severely underrepresented as speakers, except on panels concerning issues of immediate relevance to them. No one at the Mumbai WSF adequately addressed the massive and undeniable divide that existed between intellectuals, professionalised NGOs and the grassroots. There was also little discussion of how 'new' left methods of consensus decision-making (which presuppose an ability on the part of each individual to understand, and adopt a position on, the issues at hand) could work in societies with appallingly low literacy rates.

Linguistic exclusion also impeded participation. While care was usually taken to ensure that information was translated into the three or four most commonly understood languages of the audience, logistical and technical difficulties meant that where real-time translation was unavailable, non-English speakers were forced to make do with summaries or translations of poor quality. On a conceptual level, Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes that 'the alternative to a general theory [i.e. a new 'ism'] is the work of translation' and that what is needed is 'translation to enlarge reciprocal intelligibility without destroying the identity of what is translated'.[7] Listening to Pakistani anti-nuclear activist Pervez Hoodbhoy at an evening plenary on 'Religious, Ethnic and Linguistic Exclusion and Oppression', I was struck by how much more remained to be done. Arguing that concepts such as 'science' and 'secularism' were truly universal, Hoodbhoy went on to undermine his principal argument by continuing to use these English terms in an otherwise impeccable Urdu translation of his speech.

Finally, for the disabled, the notion of the WSF as an 'open space' must have seemed like a cruel joke. The exclusion of the disabled operated at both a logistical level (disability-related events were sited in shoddy locations lacking proper wheelchair access, disabled-friendly toilets or volunteers to provide assistance) and a programme level (disability was not represented at any of the plenaries).[8] More troubling still is the fact that disability rights have yet to be mainstreamed into the human rights movement, but remain ghettoised as a distinct and still marginal rights issue. One of the more jarring pictures at the WSF must surely have been the sight of 300-odd disabled delegates at the Media Centre, protesting their exclusion from the alternative worlds ostensibly being constructed at the Forum.[9]

The notion of the WSF as an open but non-neutral space makes sense to me. But we need to clarify what exactly it is not neutral to, by defining more precisely the exclusions that are intentional and their underlying rationale. And a great deal more needs to be done to remove the exclusions that are unintentional, so as to make the Forum a more open space for its intended participants.

FOOTNOTES

[1] World Social Forum 2004, Charter of Principles, <http://www.wsfindia.org/charter.php>

[2] Naomi Klein, 'The Hijacking of the WSF', 30 January 2003, <http://www.nologo.org/>

[3] See for example 'Left Parties' Programmes in WSF', *People's Democracy*, 28:3 (18 January, 2004) http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0118/01182004_wsf_%20left.htm

[4] Bishakha De Sarkar & Satish Nandgaonkar, "It is a Dirty Business But I See it as a Challenge": Patkar – Why Medha Wants to Join Politics', *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), 28 February 2004.

[5] Cited from Jai Sen, 'A Tale of Two Charters', in Sen et al., eds., *Challenging Empires*,
http://www.choike.org/documentos/wsf_s113_jai.pdf

[6] Mario Osava, 'WSF draws young, elite, educated participants, says study. Where are the poor and marginalized?', http://www.infochangeindia.org/infochange_wsf06.jsp?wsf06

[7] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter-Hegemonic Globalisation (Part II)', in Sen et al., eds., *Challenging Empires*,
http://www.choike.org/documentos/wsf_s504_sousa.pdf

[8] Meenu Bhambhani, personal communication with author.

[9] Huned Contractor, 'No place for the disabled',
http://www.infochangeindia.org/infochange_wsf17.jsp?wsf17

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